

[Boswell to Rousseau. Original in French]¹

Geneva, 31 December 1764

MANY, MANY THANKS, SIR, for the note with which you have honoured me. Many, many thanks for having recommended me to your intimate friend. You have spoken of me in the style that my enthusiasm would have desired. Believe me, I shall not prove you wrong.

And you left your letter to Monsieur Deleyre open. And Boswell is already the confidant of your interesting concerns and of the effusions of your heart.² Sir, you fill up the measure of my noble pride. You told me that all I lacked was to know my own worth. I know it now.

I have been with Monsieur de Voltaire. His conversation is the most brilliant I have ever heard. I had a conversation alone with him lasting an hour. It was a very serious conversation. He spoke to me of his natural religion in a way that struck me. In spite of all that has happened, you would have loved him that evening. I said to myself, *Aut Erasmus aut Diabolus*.³

Here I am in the city of which you were once proud to be a citizen, and which you will never be able to deprive of the glory of having borne you. Your *Letters from the Mountain* are making a tremendous noise here. I have for the most part found myself among the partisans of the magistracy, consequently among your furious enemies. I should be ashamed to repeat to you what I have

¹ Translated from the original letter, now in the Public Library of Neuchâtel, as printed by Professor C. B. Tinker in *Letters of James Boswell*, 1924, i. 65-68. There is among the Boswell papers at Yale a complete draft showing only trifling differences from the letter as sent. In my translation I have made grateful use of some phrases from Professor Tinker's translation in *Young Boswell*, 1922, pp. 54-58.

² Rousseau later informed Deleyre that he had not intended Boswell to read the letter but had left it open through absent-mindedness. There is therefore no reason to suppose that in his characterisation of Boswell he was not being perfectly frank.

³ "Erasmus or the Devil," the remark of Sir Thomas More when he first met Erasmus. Boswell means that if what he saw that evening was not the true Voltaire, it must have been the Devil, for no human being was capable of the impersonation.

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heard them say in their rage against "that scoundrel Rousseau." You are the cause of a terrible ferment in this seat of learning. I consider Geneva like Athens, but an Athens during the persecution of Socrates.

You said that you were interested in me. Will you then write to me as often as your occupations and your physical and mental discomforts permit? You can do me a great deal of good. You said that there are points at which our souls are bound together. What glory for me! I have an ambition of the strongest kind to increase the number of those points.

I set out for Italy tomorrow. I beg you to give me your advice as to how to conduct myself so as to profit most in that country of the fine arts. I love antiquities. I love painting. I shall have the best opportunities for perfecting myself in both. I have a real taste for music. I sing tolerably well. I play on the flute a little, but I think it beneath me. Two years ago I began to learn to play the violin, but I found it so difficult that I gave it up. That was a mistake. Tell me, would I not do well to apply seriously to music—up to a certain point? Tell me what instrument I should choose. It is late, I admit. But shall I not have the pleasure of making steady progress, and shall I not be able to soothe my old age with the notes of my lyre?¹

You know me well, Sir, for you have read the sketch of my life. But I forgot to tell you an anecdote that has troubled me. Last summer I was in a large company in Germany. It was a very disagreeable company, and I was vexed at having to waste time in it. They were all praising the French, and I declaimed against that nation in the rudest terms. An officer rose, came to my side, and said, "Sir, I am French, and no one but a scoundrel would speak so of that nation." We were still at dinner. I made him a bow. I had half an hour to reflect. After dinner was over, I took the Captain into the garden. I said to him, "Sir, I am deeply embarrassed. I was very impolite; I am sincerely sorry for it. But you have made use of an

¹ "The vision of James Boswell in the role of Ossian, with white beard streaming to the winds, amid the romantic glades of Auchinleck, soothing his stricken age with a lyre, is one that no kindly imagination will reject" (C. B. Tinker, *Young Boswell*, 1922, p. 55).

expression which a man of honour cannot put up with, and I must have satisfaction for it. If it is possible to avoid a quarrel, I should be happy, for I was wrong. Will you be good enough to apologise to me before the company? I will apologise to you first. If you cannot agree to my proposal, we must fight, though I confess that I shall do it with repugnance." I spoke to him with the sang-froid of a philosopher determined to do his duty. The officer was a worthy man. He replied, "Sir, I will do everything you wish." We went back into the company. We made our apologies to each other. We embraced. The affair was over. Yet I could not be at ease until I had consulted two or three Scotsmen. I said to them, "Gentlemen, I am a simple man; I am not acquainted with the rules you follow in society, but I think I acted like a man. You are my countrymen. I ask your opinions." They assured me that the affair had been honourably adjusted on both sides. They advised me to take the scrape as a lesson for the future. Forgive me, Sir, for having told you this story. As I hope to be truly reckoned among your friends, I wish you to know all the good and all the bad of my character, so that you may cherish the one and correct the other. I am timid by temperament, and my education did everything to make me the slave of fear. But I have a soul capable of breaking these vile chains and forcing myself to feel the noble courage that belongs to a man.

What is your serious opinion as to duels? You have not said enough on the subject in the *Héloïse*.¹ There are people who would have us believe that the Gospel teaches us to be too delicate. I am a little of that way of thinking myself.

I have had a letter from Lord Marischal, full of goodness and gaiety.

¹ To any one who had read in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* Julie's long and burning indictment of the whole system of duelling—not to mention the account of the behaviour of Lord Édouard Bomston after receiving a challenge—this may seem an odd statement. But the *Nouvelle Héloïse* was a work of fiction, and Boswell could not be sure that it presented Rousseau's personal views. The problem of duelling was a very real one to Boswell. He brought the subject up again and again in his conversations with Johnson, and never came to a clear conclusion as to what a man of honour who professed to be a Christian should do if he were insulted or challenged.

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You will not object if I write occasionally to Mademoiselle Le Vasseur. I assure you that I have formed no scheme of abducting your housekeeper. I often form romantic plans but never impossible ones. Tell me, can I hope to be able to write French some day?

I am truly yours,

BOSWELL.

[Boswell to Thérèse Le Vasseur. Original in French]

Geneva, 31 December 1764

I TAKE THE LIBERTY, MY DEAR MADemoisELLE, of sending you a garnet necklace, which you will have the goodness to keep as a slight remembrance of a worthy Scot whose face you found honest.¹

I shall never forget your worth. I shall never forget your feats of legerdemain. You weave lace.² You do the cooking. You sit down at table. You make easy, cheerful conversation. Then you rise, the table is cleared, the dishes are washed, all is put in order, Mademoiselle Le Vasseur is with us again. Only a juggler could perform such feats.

Take good care of your charge, you who hold the Great Rousseau under lock and key. But do not be too haughty because of your station. Deign to write to me sometimes and to give me a particular account of what is happening to you. You have promised me that you will.³ You have doubtless always believed that a promise ought to be sacred. And the Philosopher with whom you dwell teaches you no other doctrine in that regard.

Tell me how things stand with our poor family, the good woman with so many children. I am very fond of one of her daughters because it was she who came to fetch me when it was time for me to go to Monsieur Rousseau.

Farewell, Mademoiselle. Allow me to salute you with a kiss.

BOSWELL.

¹ He paid eight crowns for it, entering it in his expense account under date of 1 January.

² "Vous travaillez avec les fuseaux": literally, "You work with bobbins." I assume that this refers to the weaving of bobbin-lace on a pillow.

³ Thérèse was practically illiterate. She could write, with very bizarre spelling, but very seldom did.